

America's Secret WAR

The Commander of the California Air National Guard and its Director of Plans discuss the recently declassified missions they flew in Vietnam, when they were airmen once...and young.

By Major Stan Zezotarski, HQ, STARC



1Lt Charles Cross stands in front of his UH-1P "Green Hornet" helicopter after returning from a mission in Vietnam (circa 1969).

Bullets rip through the United States Air Force UH-1P "Green Hornet" helicopter's frame, and rocket propelled grenades burst around its body, breaking windows and rocking the aircraft, but the young Air Force lieutenant steadies the aircraft, while his rear gunner suppresses enemy fire below with violent bursts of machinegun fire.

Above him soars an O-2 observation aircraft, armed only with small rockets, observing, directing, and sometimes calming the pilots of the Green Hornets, directing them into areas clear from enemy fire, or warning them of approaching danger.

A small, long-range reconnaissance team led by Green Berets below are engaged with the enemy. Their only hope for survival rests on whether the crew of a 20th Special Operations Squadron's Green Hornet helicopter can extract them from a field crawling with enemy. The Green Hornet pilot, First Lieutenant Jim Fleming, and his crew successfully extracts the Green Berets. The young pilot and crew could have easily turned their aircraft around, vacated the area, and returned home, deeming the mission "impossible."

Instead, Fleming receives the Medal of Honor for his heroics, one of 10 Medal of Honor recipients from the "Studies and Operations Group," SOG—better known today as the Special Operations Group. His unit, the 20th Special Operations Squadron, was recently awarded its second Presidential Unit Citation award. Colonel Charles Cross, Fleming's roommate during the war, and now Chief of Plans for the California Air National Guard, was a member of that unit from 1968-69. He flew nearly 100 missions in support of Operation DANIEL BOONE

in Cambodia. In an emotional ceremony at The Office of the Adjutant General on May 3, 2003 Major General Daniel Gibson, Commander of the California Air National Guard, presented the award to Cross. Gibson's presence added value to the recognition because he also supported the SOG, flying OV-10 aircraft in more than 75 missions in Operation PRAIRIE FIRE in Laos from 1970-1971.

They fought a war where the United States Government publicly disavowed any

knowledge of their existence, and where the rules of war did not guarantee them humane treatment, or even spare them humiliation and execution, if captured. Gibson's, Cross', and the entire SOG's heroics remained classified for more than 30 years, buried accounts of the brave men who fought in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. According to John L. Plaster, author of *SOG: The Secret Wars Of America's Commandos In Vietnam*, the SOG had one of the highest kill-rate ratios in U.S. Military history, reaching levels as high as 150 enemy killed for every Green Beret that perished. The author also says that SOG "logged a combat record unequalled in U.S. History."

But family and peers of those SOG forces were denied access to any information that would reveal how their loved ones fought, died, or disappeared, because survivors were sworn to a code of silence, promising to never talk about these missions. These warriors maintained their silence until the Department of Defense recently declassified their missions, opening the door for them to talk about them publicly.

As clouds of silence cleared, however, their stories are gradually emerging. Gibson was a Forward Air Controller, or a FAC, flying reconnaissance and close air support in support of the Green Berets. Cross piloted a Green Hornet helicopter gunship, inserting and extracting Green Berets from Cambodian jungles. Both men received numerous combat awards for their bravery. Gibson received four Distinguished Flying Crosses, and Cross received two. They endured, witnessed, and survived terrifying combat. Yet, 30 years later, they downplay their heroics and, instead, remember and honor the bravery of their peers.



Captain Dan Gibson, left, completes one of his tours in Vietnam as an OV-10 "Bronco" pilot (circa 1971).

"They were the bravest men I ever encountered," Gibson, said reflecting upon the Green Berets and the Vietnamese soldiers who fought along side them. "Under horrible circumstances, you see people at their best."

The operations in Cambodia and Laos were vital to both U.S. and enemy forces. The enemy operated the Ho Chi Min trail, moving trucks, armored personnel carriers, and supplies through these countries to sustain enemy forces fighting in Vietnam. The United States and South Vietnamese needed vital intelligence that would enable them to cut off the enemy's supply pipeline.

"The North Vietnamese had 40,000-50,000 people maintaining this road network," Gibson said. "We tied up a lot of enemy forces in Laos. They saved countless American lives with the intelligence gathered about tanks, APCs, Surface to Air Missiles, Air Defense Artillery, and other very sophisticated equipment they were transporting down that Ho Chi Min Trail. Of course, their story until the very end was that the Viet Cong were fighting this battle all alone in South Vietnam. That was ludicrous. Especially toward the end when North Vietnamese tanks rolled across the border, it was pretty obvious to the whole world at that time that their claims weren't true."

The enemy guarded every conceivable landing zone and route they could possibly watch to deny the Green Berets teams' access to observe, report, and sometimes destroy command and control headquarters. But SOG forces continued to operate effectively despite overpowering odds.

As the war progressed, the enemy trained their own special forces to track and capture the Green Berets. Political pressure further complicated the

SOG's ability to fight, restricting them from engaging enemy forces, unless they were fired upon first.

"To compare it to something that a citizen can relate to, think of it as a very high stake game of neighborhood hide and seek," Cross said. "There are only so many places in the neighborhood where you can run and hide for any period of time. Complicating that would be to attempt to run and hide while beating a big base drum. The base drum is the sound of the Huey's *whomp, whomp, whomp*. By the time the enemy heard us—many times five minutes in advance—it really compromised the clandestine operation. It limited our landing zones in triple canopy jungle. They began to realize that we



PHOTO BY 1LT CHARLES CROSS

The legendary SFC Jerry "Mad Dog" Shriver leans against the nose of Lieutenant Cross' helicopter. Note the bullet hole near bottom right of photo, beneath Shriver's thumb.

were gathering intelligence, harassing and interdicting their neighborhood—the Ho Chi Min Trail—and they realized they no longer had total sanctuary status, as our operations continued. So in order to counter what we were doing, they went on the offensive, recognizing our very limited access points."

Despite shrinking areas to insert and extract troops, political rules of engagement that handicapped their ability to strike first, knowledge of grotesque torture if captured, and understanding their own government would not acknowledge their existence—possibly even declare them deserters—the SOG's morale remained high, Cross and Gibson said. These factors also increased the risk that these small teams would face enemy fire.

Gibson recalled one mission near the tri-border area—Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam—where he guided a helicopter inserting an all South Vietnamese special forces team. After the helicopter inserted the team into a landing zone, Gibson continued orbiting the area until relieved by another Forward Air Controller.

"Captain Dan Thomas was the forward air controller who relieved me," Gibson said. "He had an Army Special Forces Captain, Dan Carr, in the backseat of his OV-10. We talked on the radio, but we never saw each other because the weather was pretty bad. They just never came home. I never knew what happened to them."

Gibson and his backseat Green Beret partner returned to the area to resume Thomas' and Carr's mission, only to find that the Special Forces team was pinned down and waiting for extraction.

"I called for our people to come from the Nakhon Phanom, Thailand—which was an hour or so away, Gibson said. "Meanwhile an Army Huey showed up. The Huey came from South Vietnam. He evidently heard my call for help over the radio, and asked, 'Hey, can I help you?' I said, I have a team down there, they're engaged, if you could get them out, I would appreciate it."

Gibson watched as the Army Huey hovered near a tree line over the landing zone. Machinegun bullets streaked skyward from the tree line, chipping away pieces of the Huey. As Gibson watched chunks of the aircraft spinning off in all directions, he admired the courage of the pilot as he tried to squeeze into the landing zone.

"I'll never forget it," Gibson said. "He hovered there for about 30 seconds which seemed like a lifetime to me. He finally said, 'I just can't stay here any longer. I'm really getting shot up. I said, 'No kidding. Get the heck out of there.'"

Gibson remained in the area until two A-7s arrived. Once in the area, Gibson guided the A-7s to the source of the machinegun fire.

"They put their 500 pound bombs right on top of the site," Gibson said. "The good guys were only about 50 meters away—75 at the most—and that's danger close. You only do that if that's your only hope. Of course with that machinegun there, I couldn't get any helicopter into the landing zone. When you had a Prairie Fire Emergency, which was what it was called, the word went out across the net. We would get all kinds of preplanned ordnance diverted to suppress ground fire."

Gibson said that U.S. authorities interviewed the Special Forces team to find out what happened to Thomas and Carr. The team reported that they heard ground fire and "what sounded like" a crash. The SOG looked for the wreckage for six days afterwards, but found nothing. "Most Americans that were captured in Laos never came back," Gibson speculated.

While Gibson observed and directed aircraft and fire from 1,500 feet, Cross was up close and personal, flying a Green Hornet Helicopter gunship so close to the ground that he could literally see the enemy's faces when they were in the area. He ferried Green Berets in and out of landing zones. The extractions were often under intense enemy fire. Cross was wounded during his tour of duty. He had a

close call on another occasion when he helplessly watched bullets penetrate the bottom of his helicopter, zing between his legs, and exit through the top of the windshield. The skilled and courageous pilot, however, willingly risked such dangers to bring out countless Green Berets, such as the legendary “Mad Dog” Jerry Shriver.

Sergeant First Class Jerry M. “Mad Dog” Shriver was a renowned Green Beret, exploitation platoon leader. His home of record was Sacramento, California. Shriver performed numerous missions that generated intelligence that eventually saved hundreds, if not thousands, of American lives. His warrior reputation was so famous that the North Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong placed a bounty on his head. Although never officially confirmed, the enemy allegedly captured Mad Dog in Cambodia after a vicious firefight with the North Vietnamese Army. The enemy reportedly decapitated him to prove that he could never harass them again. But the enemy could not kill his legend.

“The Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army had Mad Dog surrounded once,” recalls Cross. “He responded over the radio, ‘I have them right where I want them, surrounded from the inside.’ He was a loyal soldier who took exceptional care of the Montagnards on his team.”

Both men have intense reverence for the native soldiers that the Military Assistance Command-Vietnam supported in Cambodia and Laos, and consider it a tragedy that their loyalty was never adequately rewarded.

“The Nungs were extremely loyal to the special forces and our operations,” Cross said. “When the war wore down, we left them on their own. We were unable to provide the level of repatriation and reward that their loyalty and service to America deserved because of the political sensitivity to this operation. The inability to fully recognize our own forces who fought heroically, and the Nungs and Montagnards who fought side by side with us, is a great tragedy.”

Gibson said that the Laotians were equally patriotic, fighting a great oppressor.

“That aspect will stay with me forever, Gibson said. “I will cherish the relationship with those people. There were friendly Laotians mainly in the North. They did a good job.

After their story was published in the *Los Angeles Times* on Memorial Day, several people contacted Cross and Gibson for information on the fate of fathers, sons, and friends.

“I’m in contact with the daughter of one of the gun ship pilots that was killed,” Cross said. “She is seeking more information about her father’s association with the Green Hornets. She sent me a picture of him and I confirmed, after 30 years, that it is the same individual and that we had flown together.”

A 1957 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis contacted Gibson. “He was researching



Colonel Charles Cross accepts a Presidential Unit Citation for his service with the 20th Special Operations Squadron from Major General Dan Gibson, at the Office of The Adjutant General in Sacramento, June 2003.

PHOTO BY SFC ROBERT PACK

what happened to some of his friends in his graduating class,” Gibson said. “One of them was an Air Force Major stationed at the base from which I flew. I was able to tell him that there is a very active program going on in Vietnam and Laos excavating crash sites. He had the grid coordinates of the particular crash site of his friend. Someday there will be a joint effort to go in and find the remains.”

After more than 30 years of silence, it’s obvious that the SOG’s story is not one of forgotten heroes, but of brothers who will not forget. Symbolically, Gibson still flies that OV-10, a FAC, looking for the honor, bravery, and dignity of those who did not come back, dipping a wing to point the Green Hornet into a landing zone to retrieve them.

“I will always have a special place in my heart for the Special Forces,” Gibson said.

Cross hovers his Green Hornet helicopter just above the tree line of the human spirit, lowers it past an historical canopy that obscures the brave acts of his peers. He remains focused on the faces of the past, determined to retrieve their memory, their honor, their country’s respect and admiration. From the tree line echoes the haunting voices that perhaps only those who fought America’s secret war can hear, “We knew you would come back.”

And they are—telling their story. 🐾

For more information on the Studies and Observation Group, visit www.macvsog.org.